Business leaders are faced with dozens of decisions that need to be made every day. As our organizations grow, the decisions generally become more frequent, more complicated, and have more serious ramifications. Sometimes it’s not about making the right decision, but just making a decision at all. The most successful entrepreneurs and business leaders in the world will tell you they have made many wrong decisions throughout the lifetime of their careers, but those failures always lead to valuable learning experiences, so above all, it’s important to find ways to make the tough decisions.
As a Navy SEAL, I learned how to make quick decisions in highly chaotic environments. SEALs are trained to be innovative free thinkers with the ability to make rational decisions with limited information under very stressful circumstances. In combat, things change constantly and contingency planning is crucial, but without proper execution and rational decision-making, no plan will lead to a successful mission. As World War I German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke said, “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.”

Similarly, business owners, executives and managers must master the ability to make good decisions quickly in order to keep the business moving forward. The best leaders, however, know when they need input from the team. Good leaders surround themselves with trusted advisors and subject matter experts, so that they can access a constant flow of data to make better decisions.

There are four basic decision-making styles that leaders can use:
1. **Command**: Command decision-making is where leaders make decisions without consulting their teams. This is an effective style, especially when things are moving quickly and the team is looking for immediate guidance. In a business setting, leaders use this style the most effectively on large financial decisions and in crisis situations. In “No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission That Killed Osama bin Laden” former Navy SEAL Mark Owen (pseudonym) tells of the key command decision that saved the mission. When the helicopter pilot inserting the roof assault team lost lift and knew the bird was going down, he immediately made the command decision to ditch the helicopter in the courtyard with a controlled crash landing. He did so successfully, without any injuries, and the assault team was able to continue their mission. In this type of scenario, there is no time to consult with the team about the best course of action.

2. **Collaborative**: Collaborative decision-making is just what it sounds like. Leaders gather their teams and request feedback and insight. The leader still makes the final call, but is armed with the proper data to make a more informed decision. This can also be referred to as evidence-based decision-making. With this style, and really in all business decisions, avoid surrounding yourself with people that always agree with you. You need people who are able to strongly argue the other side. Whether you use their
advice or not, it will help clarify your decision. In former Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell’s book “Lone Survivor” he tells the story of a decision that cost his team everything. Not long after the four-man team was inserted into a notoriously dangerous area of the Hindu Kush mountain range, tasked with capturing or killing a known al-Qaeda leader, two unarmed goat herders compromised their position. The SEALs had to make the decision whether to kill them and hide their bodies or set them free and risk the enemy being informed of their position. Team leader, friend, and Medal of Honor recipient, Michael Murphy, gathered the team and asked them for input, knowing he would eventually have to make the call. The team discussed the pros and cons of setting the goat herders free and ultimately made the decision to let them go. That decision was made based on team input and weighing the possible outcomes from all angles. The team set the goat herders free. As Luttrell tells it, they immediately knew they had made the wrong decision in this scenario. It was too late for them to reverse the decision, but they did what they could to prepare for the consequences. About an hour later, a large Taliban force surrounded them. Murphy, Danny Dietz, and Matt Axelson all lost their lives that day after a vicious gunfight that lasted for hours. Additionally, the helo full of SEALs and other special operators sent to support them was shot down killing everyone on board. Their actions held true to the SEAL Creed and they all fought valiantly to the end. Learn more at the Lone Survivor Foundation.
3. **Consensus**: Consensus-based decision-making is done more like a democratic vote. Leaders gather their teams and everyone votes. Majority rules. This process can work well when the outcome of the decision affects the entire team, and generally won’t immediately affect the bottom line. In a quick-moving business environment, this is not the most efficient way to make a decision, but there are still some decisions that can be made this way. This style of decision-making was rare in the SEAL Teams. In a business, however, this type of decision-making can help mold the culture when the team is allowed to vote and have a voice. Just remember you generally can’t please everyone.

4. **Convenience**: When surrounded by trusted peers, sometimes the best decision a leader can make is to not be the one to make a certain decision. Complete delegation (convenience decision-making) has many benefits including measuring the decision-making abilities of your managers, empowering your team, and maintaining your own sanity! By handing over some decision-making responsibilities, leaders are also building a better management team and giving them the confidence they need as their responsibilities increase. And, convenience-based decision-making is a great way to avoid the decision trap of “we’ve always done it this way.” New decision makers take fresh approaches to solving problems.

People sometimes think one of the hardest decisions I’ve made in my life was to become a Navy SEAL. It wasn’t at all. That was one of the easiest decisions I’ve ever made. The hardest decision was to leave the service while my SEAL brothers continue the fight. As my business partner and I grow our rapidly expanding digital marketing organization, we are faced with more tough decisions every day. The key is to remain calm under pressure, trust the team you have built, and use the data available to make the best possible decisions. Having a little faith doesn’t hurt either!